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PERSONAL NARRATIVES

OF THE

BATTLES OF THE REBELLION

No. 4.

MY FIRST CRUISE AT SEA

AND THE

LOSS OF THE IRON-CLAD MONITOR.

BY

FRANK B. BUTTS.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES

OF THE

BATTLES OF THE REBELLION,

BEING

PAPERS READ BEFORE THE

RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS

HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

No. 4.

"Quaeque ipse miserrima vidi,
Et quorum pars magna fui."

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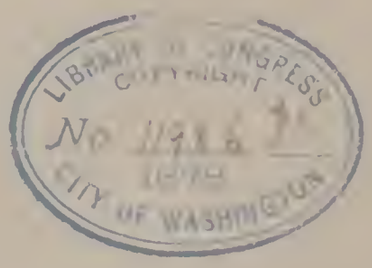
FRANK B. BUTTS,

(Late Paymaster's Clerk, United States Navy.)



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MY FIRST CRUISE AT SEA

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LOSS OF THE IRON-CLAD MONITOR.

About the first of November, or late in October, 1862, while I was stationed at Washington Navy Yard, a call was made for volunteers to add to the crew of the new Ericsson iron-clad steamer Monitor. I had then been in the naval service about two months, one of which was spent on board the receiving ship North Carolina at Brooklyn Navy Yard, and one at Washington Navy Yard, where I occupied a very pleasant position as clerk in the commandant's office. The Monitor had already immortalized herself in history, and thinking I might possibly share in some future glory, I offered myself, as did no less than two hundred others, and sixteen men besides myself were selected. We were taken

on board the Monitor, when, after another inspection, seven of the number were selected, including myself, who, for our personal appearance or some other reason, were called out and allowed to stay on board, while the others very sorrowfully returned to their quarters in the Yard. At first I thought myself quite fortunate to secure such a vessel, but I soon changed my mind and joined in the opinion of the rest of the crew, that a Monitor was the worst craft for a man to live aboard that ever floated upon water. The Monitor, compared with turreted vessels that have been launched since, was a very diminutive and imperfect vessel.

The sixth of November, when everything had been made perfect about the vessel and machinery, we hauled out from the Navy Yard into the Potomac river, and in a few hours were steaming towards the south. The first night we anchored at the mouth of the river, and the following day, after a pleasant sail down the Chesapeake, we arrived, amidst a salute, at Hampton Roads, and came to anchor off Newport News. The life of a sailor on board this vessel was the most laborious of any in the service. Their

quarters were small, there being only fourteen inches allowed for each hammock, while underneath, or perhaps over their heads, were the separate engines for working the extra attachments to the vessel, and a man was rarely allowed to sit a moment on the berth deck, even if he had the leisure. The deck of the vessel, as is well known, was nearly even with the water,—along the sides it was only twelve inches above the surface,—and the ordinary waves in that locality would sweep the whole width of the vessel. I will venture to say that my feet were not dry once in the whole time I was on board the Monitor.

We did not expect that our lives were to be spent at Hampton Roads. The Merrimack had been blown up by the rebels themselves, the new iron-clads, part of which were then in commission, began to arrive, the Army of the Potomac was on the march to Fredericksburg, Richmond could not be approached by water, and it seemed as if the work planned for us must be further south. We soon noticed that preparations were going on in which we were expected to be prominent, and we changed an-

chorage to Fortress Monroe. Here we took in a full supply of coal, and several tons of shot and shell. I was quite cheerful over the prospect of being called into action, more so because I knew there were eleven inches of iron plates to keep off the sharp-shooters' bullets, and as the Monitor had proved herself impregnable to any artillery then in use, I thought our side would have the advantage in a good fair fight. Orders were in the hands of our Captain, Commander Bankhead, to proceed to Charleston, South Carolina. There was no definite time mentioned for us to start, as the Navy Department had left it to the judgment of more experienced navigators to select favorable weather. For several days there had been a storm, and not until the morning of the twenty-ninth of December did indications seem favorable.

At daybreak we hove short our anchor, and at ten o'clock in the forenoon got under way. The Rhode Island, a powerful side-wheeled steamer, was to be our convoy, and to hasten our speed took us in tow with two long twelve-inch hawsers. The weather was heavy, with dark, stormy-looking clouds and a

westerly wind. We passed out of the Roads and rounded Cape Henry, with but little change in the weather up to the next day at noon, when the wind shifted to the south-south-west and increased to a gale. It was my trick at the lee wheel at twelve o'clock, and being a good hand I was kept there. At dark we were about seventy miles at sea, and directly off Cape Hatteras. The sea rolled high and pitched together in that peculiar manner only seen at Hatteras. The Rhode Island steamed slowly and steadily ahead. The sea rolled over us as if our vessel were a rock in the ocean only a few inches above the water, and men who stood abaft on the deck of the Rhode Island have told me that we were thought several times to have gone down. It seemed that for minutes we were out of sight, as the heavy seas entirely submerged the vessel. I had been stationed at the wheel, which had been temporarily rigged on top of the turret, and where most of the officers were. I heard their remarks, and watched closely the movements of the vessel, so that I exactly understood our condition. This going to sea in an iron-clad I began to think would be the last I

should volunteer for, and I remembered what I had been taught in the service, that a man always got into a muss if he volunteered, (and in my experience the saying was true). All the officers except those on duty in the engine-room were now on the turret. We made very heavy weather, riding one huge wave, and, being heavier than a wooden ship, with no hold for the water to raise her, plunging through the next, and splashing down upon another with a shock that would sometimes take us off our feet, while the next would sweep over us and break far above the turret, and if we had not been protected by a rifle armor we would have been washed away. The water had for some time been running down through the coal bunkers, and it is my opinion that some of the covers on deck were removed by the heavy seas, although it has been reported that the side plates had sprung apart. It was then about eight o'clock in the evening, and it was reported that the coal was too wet to keep up steam, which had now run down from its usual pressure of eighty pounds to twenty. The water in the vessel was gaining rapidly over the small pumps, which had

been working, and I heard the Captain order the Chief Engineer to start the main pump, a very powerful one of new invention, which was done, as I saw a stream of water eight inches in diameter spouting up from beneath the waves.

Signals of distress were burned to the Rhode Island. She lay to, and we rode the sea more comfortably. The Rhode Island was obliged to turn slowly ahead to keep from drifting upon us and prevent the tow-lines from being caught in her wheels. At one time when she drifted close alongside, our Captain shouted through his trumpet that we were sinking and to send their boats. The Monitor steamed ahead again with renewed difficulties, and I was ordered to leave the wheel and was kept employed as messenger by the Captain. The Chief Engineer reported the coal too wet to keep up steam and work both pump and the main engine. The tow lines were ordered to be cut, and I saw a man in attempting to obey the order swept from the deck and carried by a heavy sea leeward and out of sight in a moment. Our daring boatswain's mate then succeeded in reaching the bows of the vessel, and I

saw him swept by a heavy sea far away into the darkness, only to hear his voice once say "Farewell."

Our anchor was let go with all the cable, and struck bottom in about sixty fathoms of water. The fires were dull. The small pumps were choked up with water, and the main pump had almost stopped working. This was reported to the Captain, and I was ordered to see if there was any water in the wardroom. This was the first time I had been below the berth deck. I went forward, and saw the water running in through the hawse-pipe, an eight inch hole, at full force. Around the sides, where the hull had broken from the deck, there were several openings where the water poured in in large streams. The deck projected, in a shelf-like form, fifteen feet forward and aft and eight feet on the sides, with a heavy six-inch iron plating extending four feet below the water, and the weight of the vessel, aided by the tremendous force of the heavy seas striking between them, had caused this separation, and this particular defect in the Monitor build was the cause of the disaster.

I reported my observations, and at the same time

heard the Chief Engineer report that the water had gained very rapidly. The Captain ordered him to stop the main engine and turn all steam on the pumps, which I noticed soon worked again, and I felt somewhat encouraged. The clouds now began to separate and a moon of about half size beamed out upon the sea, and the Rhode Island, now a mile away, became visible. Signals were being exchanged and I felt that all would be saved, or at least that the Captain would not leave his ship until there was no hope of saving her. I was sent below again to see how the water stood in the wardroom. I went forward to the cabin and found the water just above the soles of my shoes, which indicated that there must be three or four feet in the vessel. I reported the same to the Captain, and all hands were set to bailing,—bailing out the ocean, as it seemed to be,—but the object was to employ the men and keep down the excitement. I kept employed most of the time taking the buckets from through the hatchway on top of the turret. They seldom would have more than a pint of water in them, the balance having been spilled out in passing from one to another.

The weather was clear but the sea did not cease rolling in the least, and the Rhode Island, with the tow lines wound up in her wheel, was rolling at the mercy of the sea, and came washing against our sides. A boat that had been lowered was caught between the vessels and sunk. Some of our seamen bravely leaped down on deck to guard our sides, and lines were thrown to them from the deck of the Rhode Island, which now lay her whole length against us, floating off astern, but not a man would be the first to leave his ship although the Captain ordered them to do so. I was again sent to examine the water in the wardroom, which I found to be more than two feet above the deck, and I think I was the last to look on a young engineer who lay seasick in his bunk, apparently watching the water as it grew deeper and deeper, and conscious what his fate must be. He called me as I passed his door, and asked if the pumps were working. I replied that they were. "Is there any hope?" he asked, and feeling a little moved at the scene, knowing certainly what must be his end, and the darkness that stared at us all, I replied, "As long as there is life there is hope."

"Hope and hang on when you are wrecked," is an old saying among sailors. I left the wardroom, and learned that the water had gained so as to choke up the main pump. As I was crossing the berth deck I heard the cabin cook, an old African negro, who was more excited himself than any one else, giving some very consoling lessons to the landsmen, who looked like death with seasickness, in a manner that many of you may have seen men display on such occasions. He congratulated them for being in a metallic coffin, and that the devil would surely pick their bones as no shark could penetrate their graves, and made other startling remarks, not spoken in so mild a way, and too wicked to be remembered.

As I ascended the turret ladder the sea broke over the ship and came pouring down the hatchway with so much force that it took me off my feet, and at the same time the steam broke from the boiler-room, as the water had reached the fires, and for an instant I seemed to realize that we had gone down. Our fires were out and I heard them blowing the water out of the boilers. I reported my observations to the Captain, and at the same time saw a boat alongside.

The Captain gave orders for the men to leave the ship, and fifteen, all of whom were seamen and men whom I had placed my confidence upon, were the ones who crowded this, the first boat to leave the ship. I was disgusted at witnessing the scramble, and not feeling in the least alarmed about myself, resolved that I, an "old haymaker," as landsmen are called, would stick to the ship as long as my officers. I saw three of these men swept from the deck and carried leeward to find their graves beneath the angry sea.

Bailing was again resumed. I occupied the turret all alone, and passed buckets from the lower hatchway to the man on top of the turret. I took off my coat—one that I had received from home only a few days previous, (I could not feel that our noble little ship was yet lost,)—and rolling it up with my boots, drew the tompion from one of the guns, placed them inside and returned the tompion. We had a black cat on board, which then sat on the breech of one of the guns, howling one of those hoarse and solemn tunes which no one can appreciate, unless filled with the superstitions which I had been taught by the

sailors who were afraid to kill a cat. I would almost as soon have touched a ghost, but I caught her and placing her in another gun, replaced the wad and tompion, but could still hear that distressing yeowl. As I raised my last bucket to the upper hatchway no one was there to take it. I scrambled up the ladder and found that we below had been deserted. I shouted to those on the berth deck to "Come up—the officers have left the ship and a boat is alongside."

As I reached the top of the turret I saw a boat made fast on the weather quarter filled with men, and three were standing on deck trying to get on board. One man was floating leeward, shouting in vain for help, another, who hurriedly passed me and jumped down from the turret, was swept off by a breaking wave and never arose, even to say, "Save me." I was excited, feeling that it was the only chance to be saved. I made fast a loose line to one of the stanchions and let myself down from the turret, the ladder having been washed away. The moment I struck the deck the sea broke over the decks and swept me as I had seen it sweep my shipmates.

I grasped one of the smoke stack braces and, hand-over-hand, ascended to keep my head above water, and it required all my strength to keep the sea from tearing me away. As it swept from the vessel I found myself dangling in the air nearly at the top of the smoke stack. I let fall, and succeeded in reaching the ridge rope that encircled the deck by means of short stanchions, and to which the boat was attached. The sea again broke over us, lifting me heels upward as I still clung to the ridge rope. I thought I had nearly measured the depth of the ocean, when I felt the turn, and as my head rose above the water I spouted up, it seemed, more than a gallon of water that had found its way into my lungs. I was then about twenty feet from the other men, whom I found to be the Captain and one seaman —the other had been washed overboard and was now struggling in the water. The men in the boat were pushing back on their oars to keep the boat from being washed on to the Monitor's deck, so that the boat had to be hauled in by the painter about ten or twelve feet. The First Lieutenant and other officers in the boat were shouting, "Is the Captain on board?"

and with severe struggles to have our voices heard above the roar of the wind and sea, we were shouting "No," and trying to haul in the boat, which we at last succeeded in doing. Then the Captain, ever caring for his men, requested us to get in, but we both, in the same voice, told him to get in first. The moment he was over the bows of the boat the Lieutenant cried, "Cut the painter! cut the painter!" I thought, "Now or lost," and in less time than I can explain it, exerting my strength beyond imagination, I hauled in the boat, sprang, caught on the gunwale, was pulled into the boat with a boat-hook in the hands of one of the men, and took my seat with one of the oarsmen. The other man, named Joice, managed to get into the boat in some way, I cannot tell how, and he was the last man saved from that ill-fated ship. As we were cut loose I saw several men standing on top of the turret, apparently afraid to venture down upon deck, and it may have been that they saw others washed overboard while I was getting into the boat, which caused their fear.

We reached the Rhode Island, which had drifted

perhaps two miles leeward, after a fearful and dangerous passage over the frantic seas, and came alongside under the lee bows, where the first boat that had left the Monitor, nearly an hour before, had just discharged its men. We found that getting on board the Rhode Island was a harder task than getting from the Monitor. We were carried by the sea from stem to stern, for to make fast would have been fatal, and the boat bounded against the ship's sides; sometimes it was below the wheel, and then, on the summit of a huge wave, far above the decks; then the two boats would crash together, and once while our surgeon was holding on to the rail, he lost his fingers by a collision which swamped the other boat. Lines were thrown to us from the deck of the Rhode Island, which were of no assistance, for not one of us could climb a small rope, and besides, the men who threw them would immediately let go their holds in their excitement, to throw another — which I found to be the case when I kept hauling in rope instead of climbing, and concluded, as the Irishman told his captain, that the end was cut off.

It must be understood that two vessels lying

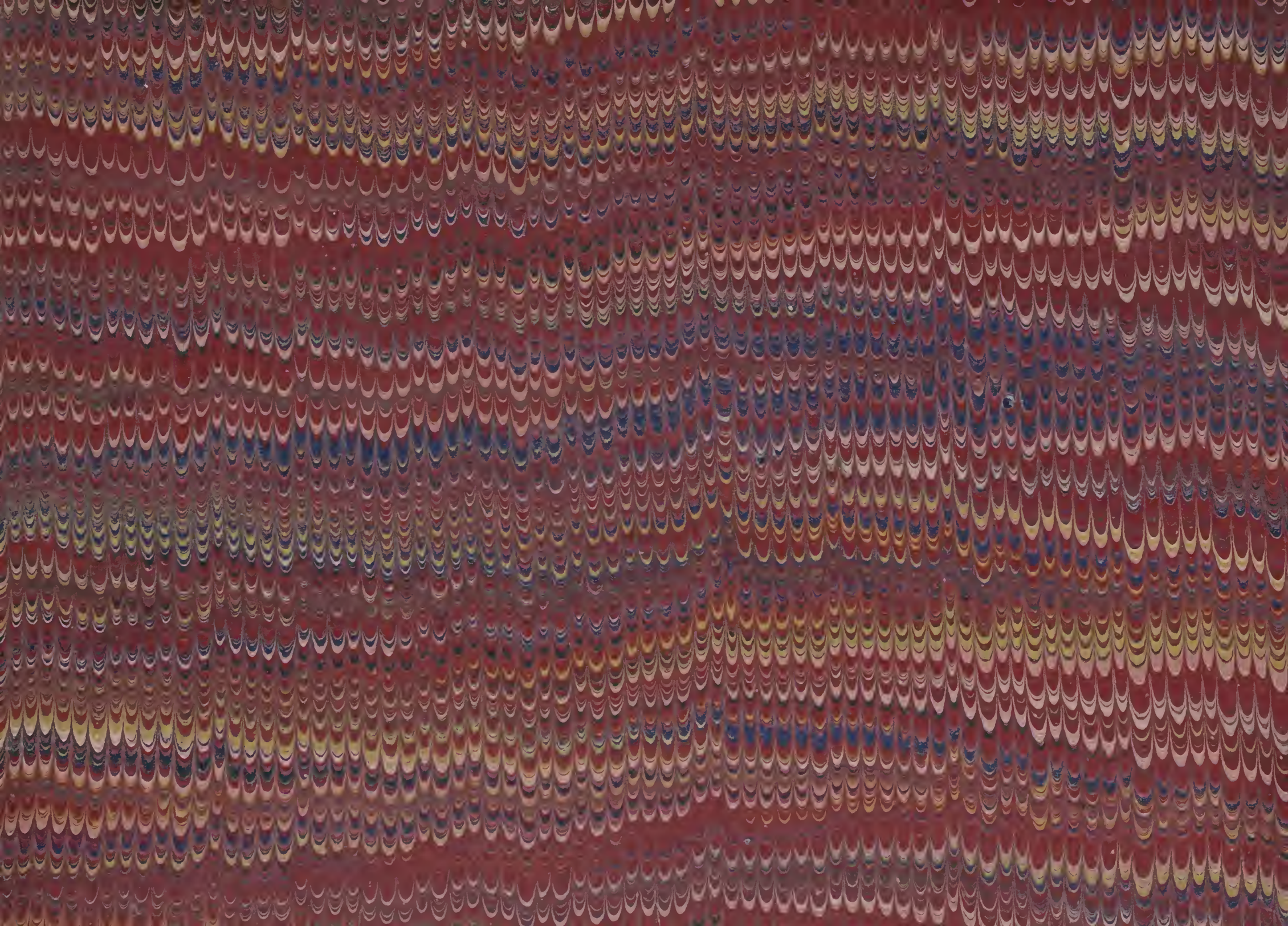
side by side, when there is any motion to the water, move alternately, or, in other words, one is constantly passing the other up or down. At one time when our boat was near the bows of the steamer we would rise upon the sea until we could touch her rail, and in an instant, by a very rapid descent, we could touch her keel. While we were thus rising and falling upon the sea, I caught a rope, and rising with the boat, managed to reach within a foot or two of the rail, when a man, if there had been one, could easily have hauled me on board. But they all followed after the boat, which at that instant was washed astern, and I hung dangling in the air over the bow of the Rhode Island, with our Acting Master hanging to the cat-head, three or four feet from me, and like myself, both hands clenching a rope, and bawling for some one to save us. Our hands grew painful and all the time weaker, until I saw his strength give way. He slipped a foot, caught again, and with his last prayer, "O God," I saw him fall and sink to rise no more. The ship rolled, and rose and fell upon the sea, sometimes with her keel out of water, or at its surface, when

I was thirty feet above the sea, and with the fate in view that called home our much-beloved companion, which no one witnessed save myself, I still clung to the rope with aching hands, calling in vain for some one to save my life. But I could not be heard, for the wind shrieked far above my voice. My heart here, for the only time in my life, gave up hope, and home and friends were most tenderly thought of. While I was in this state, within a few seconds of giving up, the sea rolled forward, bringing with it the boat, and when I would have fallen into the sea, the boat was there. I can only recollect hearing an old sailor say, as I fell into the bottom of the boat, "Where in hell did he come from?"

When I was conscious of what was going on, no one had succeeded in getting out of the boat, which then lay just forward of the wheel-house. Our Captain ordered them to throw bowlines, which was immediately done. The second one I caught and was hauled on board. I assisted in helping the others out of the boat, when it again went back to the Monitor, but did not reach it, and after drifting about on the ocean several days it was picked up by a passing vessel and carried to Philadelphia.

It was now half-past twelve, the night of the thirty-first of December, 1862. I stood on the forecastle of the Rhode Island, watching the red and white lights that hung from the pennant staff above the turret, and which now and then as we would perhaps both rise on the sea together, beam across the dark and raging sea, until at last just as the moon had passed below the horizon, 't was lost, and the Monitor, whose history is still familiar with us all, the victor of the first iron-clad conflict, the savior of our naval forces, plunged with a dying struggle at her treacherous foe and was seen no more.

The following day we arrived at Hampton Roads. This sad news reached every household, and our nation wept. As near as I can now remember, there were thirty-three lives lost and twenty-eight saved.



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